

ODEP's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program Executive Summary

A critical priority for the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), is to invest in systems change efforts that result in increased community-based, integrated employment opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities. This priority reflects growing support for a national movement called **Employment First**, a framework for systems change that is centered on the premise that all citizens, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in integrated employment and community life. Under this approach, publicly-financed systems are urged to align policies, service delivery practices, and reimbursement structures to commit to **integrated employment**¹ as the priority option with respect to the use of publicly-financed day and employment services for youth and adults with significant disabilities. Many states have formally committed to the *Employment First* framework through official executive proclamation or formal legislative action.

ODEP recognizes that many states desire to align their efforts to support individuals with disabilities toward an *Employment First* approach, but may not yet possess the capacity, experience or technical resources necessary to lead and facilitate such change. To address this need, ODEP has initiated the Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP), a cross-disability, cross-systems change initiative. EFSLMP is providing a platform for multi-disciplinary state teams to focus on implementing the *Employment First* approach with fidelity through the alignment of policies, coordination of resources, updating of service delivery models, to facilitate increased integrated employment options for people with the most significant disabilities.

Objectives of the EFSLMP

The objectives of the EFSLMP are to:

- Provide mentoring, intensive technical assistance (TA) and training from a national pool of subject matter experts and peer mentors to core states as they transform existing policies, service delivery systems, and reimbursement structures to reflect an *Employment First* approach;
- Facilitate virtual training and knowledge translation on effective practices;
- Facilitate dialogue on shared experiences related to effectuating *Employment First* policies and practice;
- Link participating states with current Federal initiatives that are focused on promoting state-level systems-change conducive to *Employment First* objectives; and
- Evaluate the impacts of the investments in state *Employment First* systems change efforts over time to identify common challenges faced by State governments and validate innovative strategies and effective practices that lead to the successful implementation of *Employment First* objectives.

EFSLMP – Provision of Intensive Technical Assistance to Core States

Through an application process, states have an opportunity to become an EFSLMP Core State. Core states receive a combination of onsite and virtual technical assistance in the following areas:

¹ ODEP defines **integrated employment** as work paid directly by employers at the greater of minimum or prevailing wages with commensurate benefits, occurring in a typical work setting where the employee with a disability interacts or has the opportunity to interact continuously with co-workers without disabilities, has an opportunity for advancement and job mobility, and is preferably engaged full-time. This definition is being modified to align with the recent passage of the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act, which contains a similar definition for the term “competitive, integrated employment”.

- Strategic Guidance on policy/funding reform, and training on effective practices from a pool of national subject matter experts.
- Practice & Policy Reform: policy analysis; strategic planning; rate restructuring and resource braiding; service delivery coordination; cross-agency collaboration; and provider contract reform.
- Provider Transformation: vision/mission statement drafting; staff restructuring/decentralization; financial diversification; executive leadership mentoring; communications/marketing; performance benchmarking.
- Capacity Building: training and ongoing coaching supports for front-line direct support professionals and management in the use and successful implementation of evidence-based effective practices that lead to integrated employment, including but not limited to: Customized Employment(CE), Individual supported employment, Individual Placement & Support (IPS); small business/entrepreneurism, asset development/financial capability strategies.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring: Access to peer experts from other state governments who have demonstrated success in implementing one or more key components of an *Employment First* approach is a critical ingredient to the EFSLMP model. Washington state served as ODEP's first mentoring state for the EFSLMP from 2012-2013. In 2006, the state of Washington adopted its "Working Age Adult Policy," the first comprehensive *Employment First* policy in the country that required employment to be an integral part of the service plan for all individuals receiving supports through the state's Medicaid waivers. In FY 2015, EFSLMP State Mentoring Ambassadors Network was established under EFSLMP, comprised of local and state government officials who have been nominated by their government agency to serve as mentors to other local and state government officials focused on implementing one or more elements of the *Employment First* approach.
- Policy consulting via participation in the EFSLMP Vision Quest Series: Vision Quest is a series of small working groups (3-4 state teams) focused on analyzing, developing and implementing policy recommendations related to a specific aspect of a state's *Employment First* systems-change efforts. States participating in the Employment First Vision Quest receive individual consultation with a designated subject matter expert, as well as participate in regular small working group and training/TA presentations.

EFSLMP's National Employment First Community of Practice

In addition to the intensive technical assistance and training being offered to the EFSLMP core states, ODEP has launched a National *Employment First* Community of Practice (CoP), which is open to state *Employment First* teams. Thirty-three state teams are currently participating in the EFSLMP Community of Practice, although it is open to all fifty states.

The EFSLMP Community of Practice provides a variety of services to support state *Employment First* teams, including:

- **Monthly Webinars**: ODEP hosts monthly educational presentations on a variety of *Employment First* topics facilitated by national leaders in the field of systems reform.
- **Access to ePolicyWorks Virtual Workspace**: ODEP's ePolicyWorks provides a free virtual policy workspace for all EFSLMP CoP participating states, along with an array of resources and services to encourage virtual communications and policy work in a safe and user-friendly environment.
- **Access to Technical Assistance Resources and Policy Tools Developed through ODEP's EFSLMP**: A variety of technical assistance resources and policy tools are available to provide additional support at no cost to participating CoP states.

ODEP's Expectation from Participating States

In exchange for participation in the EFSLMP Community of Practice, states are asked to commit to the following:

- Ongoing cross-agency collaboration at the state-level toward the establishment of an *Employment First* approach to service delivery, inclusive of (but not limited to) CoP engagement by the following state entities: Education, I/DD adult services, Medicaid, Mental Health, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Workforce Investment
- Utilization of technical resources made available by ODEP to the EFSLMP Community of Practice
- Willingness to share policies and other resources developed within your state as a result of cross-agency collaboration activities focused on implementing *Employment First* strategies so as to inform the systems-change efforts of other state teams
- Regular cross-agency participation by the above-mentioned systems in monthly EFSLMP Community of Practice webinars as well as other CoP activities planned throughout the calendar year
- Full participation in all EFSLMP evaluation activities directed toward the CoP state participants (including completion of online surveys, telephone interviews, and virtual focus groups)
- Reporting to ODEP on EFSLMP activities and progress toward achieving state goals

EFSLMP Accomplishments (FY2012-FY2014)

Since its inception in FY 2012, the EFSLMP has maximized an annual budget of approximately \$1 million to effectuate an aggressive outcomes-oriented approach to systems-change. Over 7,500 hours in intensive TA/training provided from FY2012-2014 led to the following results:

- Over 300 front-line direct service professionals trained in customized employment strategies and other effective practices that lead to increased competitive, integrated employment outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities.
- Over 25 provider organizations receiving executive leadership consulting to guide them in transitioning their business focus from the provision of segregated service delivery models to approaches that lead to integrated employment and other community-based outcomes for individuals with the most significant disabilities.
- A transition of over 500 individuals with significant disabilities who were either participating in or at risk of being placed into a facility-based day or work program to a competitive, integrated employment opportunity at minimum wage or higher.
- 15 states developing approximately 50 policy products and implementing/adopting 14 major policy changes to promote integrated employment as a preferred outcome of day and employment services for individuals with significant disabilities.
- Approximately 800 individuals from 35 states participating in ODEP's virtual National *Employment First* Community of Practice, which has led to the production of over 40 national webinar trainings and dozens of technical resources on various components of *Employment First* systems change.

Further Information and Contact

In addition to the EFSLMP, ODEP offers a dedicated website containing comprehensive information on integrated employment for a variety of audiences. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.dol.gov/odep/ietoolkit/>. For more information on ODEP's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program, please contact Serena Lowe (Senior Policy Advisor, ODEP) at Lowe.Serena.D@dol.gov. Anyone interested in receiving federal policy announcements, funding opportunities, and webinar schedules, should subscribe here: <http://www.econsys.com/efslmp/?subscribe>.